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ABSTRACT

This study deals with three questions concerning the political socialization of young children: (1) at what age evidence of political socialization begins to emerge; (2) at what age media, principally television, begins to socialize children politically; and (3) how a Presidential election campaign and the media relate to other sources of political socialization such as schools, peers, and parents. Fifty-two 4- and 5-year-old preschool children were interviewed prior to the 1976 election campaign and on the day after the election in order to measure their awareness of candidates and others involved in the campaign. It was hypothesized that: (1) children's awareness of political candidates would increase significantly from pre- to post-campaign; (2) 5-year-olds would show significantly more learning than 4-year-olds; and (3) that parents would be the most frequently mentioned source of political information. Results showed that 5-year-olds learned more than 4-year-olds; and that television was a more important source of political information about Jimmy Carter than parents for 5-year-olds, while parents and television were equally important as sources of information about President Ford. Results also indicated that females learned more than males and that Ford was better known than Carter at the start of the campaign but that children were more aware of Carter than Ford by the time the campaign was over. (MP)

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PRESCHOOLERS AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION: TELEVISION AND THE 1976 CAMPAIGN

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PS 010348

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PRESCHOOLERS AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION: TELEVISION AND THE 1976 CAMPAIGN

Abstract

Previous research indicates that the mass media play an important role in political socialization of children and adolescents in the U.S. No research, however, has looked at children younger than 9-10 years old to determine (a) at what age eivdence of political socialization begins to emerge; (b) at what age do media, principally television which does not demand reading skills, begin to politically socialize children; (c) how a Presidential election campaign and media, parental, and peer influence function together to affect awareness of the political process. In a before and after study of the effects of the 1976 Presidential campaign on 4 and 5 year old preschoolers, it was discovered that the campaign had significant measurable effects on these children. Results showed that (a) females learned more than males; (b) five year olds learned more than 4 year olds; (c) television was a more important source of political information about Jimmy Carter than parents for 5 year olds, while parents and television were equally important as sources of information about President Ford; (d) while Ford was better known than Carter at the start of the campaign, Carter's awareness levels actually surpassed Ford's after the campaign was over. It seems clear that television begins to play an important role in politically socializing children at approximately age 5; this age seems to be the beginning point for political interest and awareness that continues to develop through adolescence and into adulthood.

PRESCHOOLERS AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION: TELEVISION AND THE 1976 CAMPAIGN

Media researchers have continually pointed to the area of socialization as the number one priority for future research in mass communication. Comstock, et. al.'s survey of priorities among social science researchers in mass communication revealed the media's role in socialization as the most important area for future research; included in this general area, of course, is the role of the media in political socialization.[1] Research in political socialization has shown an upsurge since 1970, essentially spurred by Chaffee, Ward, and Tipton's comprehensive study with junior and senior high school students.[2] Chaffee, et. al., collected data in the areas of political knowledge, awareness and interest, and media usage. Their conclusion was that mass media clearly play a significant role in political socialization. A subsequent study by Conway, Stevens, and Smith also found evidence of media impact in politically socializing fourth to sixth graders.[3] Media effects, however, seemed limited to children who were aware of political parties and candidates; abstract ideas such as perceived importance of political parties were not enhanced by news exposure.

Despite previous research in political socialization, no studies to date have examined the role of mass media in socializing very young children. Evidence indicates the media are important for children aged 10 and older, although only Chaffee, et. al., have studied media effects over time (during and after a political campaign). In discussing gaps in political socialization research, Becker, McCombs, and McLeod effectively summarized the need for future studies:

> Direct investigation of the media as socializing agents has been infrequently attempted; instead most attention has been directed to the role of the family and of schools. The media are assumed

> to exert influence on political cognitions "somehow," though evidence for this is largely intuitive. Since exposure to television begins early in life and occupies as much of the young school child's time as does school, it is 'obvious' that it must be a source of influence. A more exact specification is needed.[4]

The essential questions remain in the area of political socialization and young children: (1) At how early an age do media, principally television, facilitate socialization? (2) How do the media relate to other sources of political socialization such as schools, peers, parents? (3) Do young children exhibit significant increases in political knowledge as the result of a Presidential election campaign? The study reported here provided basic information in answering these questions. Preschoolers, ages 4 and 5, were interviewed prior to the 1976 election campaign and the day after the election. Awareness of the candidates and others involved in the campaign was measured before and after the campaign, as was knowledge about what a President does, what a campaign is, what an election is, etc.

HYPOTHESES

Based on previous political socialization research, it was hypothesized: (a) that children's awareness of political candidates, the Presidency, elections, campaigns, etc. would increase significantly from the pre- to post-campaign surveys; (b) 5-year olds would show significantly more learning than 4-year olds; (c) major sources of learning about the political process would include peers, television, school, and parents, with parents being the most frequently mentioned source; in essence, younger children would be expected to be more parent-oriented than peer-oriented or television oriented, as documented by Condry, Siman, and Bronfenbrenner.[5] School was expected to play a negligible role, since the children were pre-schoolers and were attending a day care center, as opposed to a pre-school.

METHODOLOGY

A total of fifty-two 4 and 5 year old preschoolers were interviewed individually on August 31, 1976, and again on November 3rd. Children attended a day care center in the Houston, Texas, area. Of the fifty-two children, 40 were present for both the pre- and post-interviews, 10 males and 10 females at the 4 and 5 year old levels. The remaining 12 interviews were from six children who completed the pre-test and six children who only participated in the post-campaign interview. The latter 12 children's responses enabled the researchers to test for pre-test sensitization, those effects that might have been caused by drawing the children's attention to the candidates and campaign as a result of asking them to identify candidates and to answer questions about the Presidency, campaigns, elections, etc.

All children were presented with clear, close-up pictures, one at a time, of Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, John Connally, and Richard Nixon. Reagan was included because he was well known in Texas as a result of the Presidential Primary and because of his close race for the nomination and an expected low profile during the campaign; Connally was included because he was (and did) to head President Ford's campaign in Texas; Nixon was included to check for recognition levels of the most recent former President whose Administration was a likely subject for discussion during the campaign. In order to rule out a child's inability to recognize a single picture, two additional poses of each candidate were also used to facilitate recognition accuracy.

One measure of recognition was the simple yes/no response to the question: "Do you know who this man is?" The follow-up for yes answers was: "Can you tell me his name?" Attention was paid to recall of both the first and last names. The third awareness question asked was: "Can you tell me what this man does or is doing?" Answers sought here were "running for President; was running for President (Reagan); asking people to vote for President Ford or was Governor (Connally); and, was President (Nixon)." Thus, a range of awareness for each person was possible; a total awareness score would include, for example: "yes" to picture recognition; "That's Jimmy Carter; he's running for President."

Awareness of other political events and concepts was also measured. Children were asked: "What is an election?, What does a President do?, and What is a campaign?" Understanding of these elements seemed crucial to measuring the impact of the campaign via parents, peers, and/or television.

The final dimension of the interview probed sources of information about the people and events in the 1976 Presidential Campaign. Children were asked: "Have you heard anyone talk about Jimmy Carter (same question repreated for each of the people)? Where did you hear it? What did they say?" The first question was a simple yes/no type. The second identified peers, parents, television, or other sources of information. The third question was concerned with positive or negative comments that conveyed a voting preference for Ford or Carter.

All responses were appropriately coded and analyzed via (1) analysis of variance: t-tests for related measures (pre- vs. post-) and F tests for age (4 vs. 5-year olds) and sex main effects and age by sex interactions based

on difference scores (pre-test to post-test changes); (2) correlation and regression analyses with information gain, recognition, awareness scores, etc. as dependent measures and age and sex as predictor variables. For all analyses, the .05 level of significance was used, although attention was paid to differences significant at the .10 level, given the exploratory nature of this study.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are presented in three basic sections: (1) Candidate/Person awareness measures; (2) Political Concepts awareness measures (for key items involved in the election); (3) Sources of Political Information (about the candidates and other figures involved in the election).

Candidate/Person Awareness Measures:

Picture recognition of Jimmy Carter increased significantly from the pre-test phase to the post-test phase ($t=5.03$, $df=38$, $p < .001$); significant increases were also in evidence for Gerald Ford ($t=4.72$, $df=38$, $p < .001$) and for John Connally ($t=3.98$, $df=38$, $p < .001$). Analysis of variance for the difference scores using the independent variables of sex and age showed a significant age effect for all three candidates in that five-year olds learned more than four-year olds; there was also a significant sex effect for both Carter and Ford, but not for Connally. Females learned significantly more than males.

For the measure of name recognition, Ford, Carter, and Connally all showed significant increases; again, as with picture recognition, there were significant age (five years olds doing better than four year olds) and sex effects (females doing better than males). Also in evidence and of con-

siderable importance is the significant decrease in the name recognition of former President Nixon; the same tendency appeared for Ronald Reagan, but the decline was not statistically significant.

Political Concepts Awareness Measures:

In answer to the question of what a President is and does, 30% of the total sample had an at least partially correct response; 65% knew after the election. In addition to this significant overall shift, analysis of variance of the change scores showed that males did better than females, reversing the findings for candidate/person recognition; as expected, however, five year olds did significantly better than four year olds.

Responding to the question of what a campaign is, 0% knew before the campaign started; 35% knew afterward. The only significant difference in analysing the change scores was a sex effect, females learning more than males.

For the question of what an election is, 10% of the total sample knew prior to the campaign, while 50% knew about it after the election. Analysis of the change scores showed that females learned significantly more than males and that five year olds did significantly better than four year olds.

Sources of Political Information:

Given the substantial changes from the pre-election to post-election phases, the question of paramount interest was: from what sources did the children learn about the candidates, persons involved in the campaign, and the concepts involved in the campaign? Results for this section can be most clearly understood by examining each of the four age/grade combinations.

Children were asked if they had heard anyone talk about each of the previously mentioned five candidates/persons; if they had, they were asked to identify who and what was said. Carter went from 0% to 100% among the four year old females, while Ford went from 20% to only 60%. Of the sources identified, these children mentioned parents or family for Carter in 80% of the cases and television in 20%; the comparable figures for Ford showed all sources mentioned as parents or family.

Among the five year old females, Carter went from 40% to 100%, while Ford went from 60% to 100%. Of the sources, Carter showed 80% television and 20% parents/family; Ford showed 40% television and 60% parents.

The results for the four year old males showed that Carter went from 40% to 80%, while Ford went from 50% to 80%. Regarding the sources of information, both candidates showed 80% parents and 20% peers.

Among the five year old males, Carter went from 80% to 100%; Ford started and ended at 80%. Of the sources, Carter showed 80% television and 20% parents, while Ford showed 60% television and 40% parents.

These results clearly indicated two substantial observations: (1) that Carter's principal vehicle for reaching the five year olds was overwhelmingly television (80%), compared to only 20% citing parents or family; Ford, on the other hand was divided 50/50 among the five year olds for television and parents/family. (2) television's impact as a source is minimal for four year olds but increases substantially over parents for five year olds, especially for Carter and to a lesser extent for Ford; the four versus five year old difference marks the turning point for children's awareness of television as a source of political information; prior to five parents dominate.

Also of interest in this study was what was said about the candidates by the various sources. For those children who reported television, the comments tended to be relatively factual in nature; for example, "he is running for President;" "he was talking to people and asking them to vote for him." Parents' comments showed some evidence of value judgments, but the opinions were not apparently widespread; some examples of parental statements of a preferential nature were: "that guy (Carter) sure is on the TV a lot;" "that Jimmy Carter is a good person;" "Ford talks too much and doesn't do enough." Regardless of the comments, children seemed to have only a fuzzy idea of who, if anyone, their parents were for in the election. This finding suggests that while children may recall parental or television comments about candidates, their perceptions of positive or negative are not in evidence. The stage at which this phenomenon occurs remains for future research to determine.

Correlation and Regression Results:

In addition to the analysis of variance measures reported in the above sections, strength of relationships among the predictor variables of age and sex were calculated to provide an indication of the magnitude of the relationships in question. The results are presented in Table One.

The findings indicate that the relationships for both the age and sex variables are substantial, especially in combination to predict such measures as picture identification for Connally, name identification for Carter, having heard talk about Carter, and answers to what a President is and what an election is. In total, the correlations were impressive, considering the restricted age and sex variables.

Pre-test Sensitization Control:

One of the problems associated with any pre-post design is that exposing a sample to the pre-test questionnaire may alert participants to certain kinds of information and in effect heighten their attention and interest. In the present study, one fear was that asking the pre-schoolers about the candidates, the election, sources, etc. would cause them to pay more attention to the campaign, much more than they would have paid if not pre-tested. Such a contamination of course would rule out attributing information gain to the campaign, the variable of central interest in political socialization studies such as this one. In order to measure any sensitization effects, six children took only the pre-test and an additional six children took only the post-test. The findings for both control groups could then be compared to their respective outcomes among the primary sample who had both the pre- and post-tests. The comparison showed that among the pre-only group, their responses very similar to the pre-test results from the pre/post group. Moreover, the post-only group showed responses almost identical to those in the post-test for the pre/post group. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to conclude that the pre-test did not unnecessarily or significantly alter the attention and interest of the children.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis of this study was that awareness of the children would increase significantly from the pre- to post-campaign surveys. This hypothesis was supported in a clear and consistent manner. Awareness showed huge increases for candidates and concepts alike. The information deluge of the campaign, principally via television for the five year olds, apparently had a significant impact on pre-schoolers, starting them well on their way to building political knowledge, an essential building block in political

socialization. It should be pointed out, too, that the information about the candidates from television would seem to be from paid political announcements rather than news coverage. The reason for this was evident in cataloging children's usual times of day for watching television and their low levels of reporting television news viewing. Given the fact that spots for both Ford and Carter, and in Texas, Ford spots by John Connally, were shown in after-school hours and in early evening prime time (starting at 7pm in the midwest), the primary contribution to the learning of these pre-schoolers about the candidates and the campaign may be attributable mostly to television advertising messages, prepared and paid for by the candidates themselves. For preschoolers, paid political announcements may be serving as a learning source much in the same way that ads for products and services do. Coming between programs or within a program, political spots are processed along with the products and services spots.

The second hypothesis of this study was that four-year olds would learn significantly less than five year olds. Like the first hypothesis, this prediction was totally confirmed. The difference between four and five year olds should still be highly tentative, however, since the verbal abilities of the 5 year olds were substantially greater than the four year olds; it may be that four year olds were affected as much in some areas as five year olds - only their verbal ability is not sufficient to demonstrate that level of learning. While the picture recognition measure showed the same 4 verus 5 year old difference, additional non-verbal measures should be used to further clairfy the age difference. At this point, five seems to be a crucial year in socialization.

One effect that occurred which was not predicted deserves additional comment. The findings generally showed that females learned significantly more than males; in fact, the ones who profited the most on all of the learning dimensions were the five year old females. For example, Carter's picture recognition went from 0% to 100% and name identification from 10% to 100% among this group. None of the other three groups showed increases of this magnitude. Since it was also clear that females cited television as a frequently used source of political information, it would seem that television's role takes on increasing importance as compared to parents. It may be that cultural norms preclude the mention or discussion of politics with females, while it seems that some parental interaction does occur for boys. Given the apparent inappropriateness of parental discussion or mention of politics with females, television emerges as the primary source of early political socialization for females.

The third hypothesis was that parents would be the most frequently mentioned sources of political information. This prediction held only for four year olds, and to a certain extent for information about Gerald Ford. With five year olds and especially for President-elect Carter, television turned out to be more frequently mentioned than parents. The orientation to the medium and the interspersed political commercials on television make it a pervasive medium. As Mendelsohn and O'Keefe so aptly put it in their panel study of the 1972 Presidential Election, the age of television with its programs and commercials makes it nearly impossible to "hide from its influence." It seems that children as well as adults are susceptible to political information from the ever-present television receiver.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this investigation clearly indicate that television plays a significant role in the socialization of preschool children, especially for five year olds who cited television as frequently or more often than parents as a source of information about politics, especially about Jimmy Carter, and to a lesser extent, Gerald Ford. While it was expected that parents would play an important role in politically socializing their children, the emergence of television as an equally strong if not stronger factor for five year olds points to that age as the crucial stage at which media (in this case television) begin to politically socialize children by providing them with factual information.

Obviously, the level of cognitive awareness as measured for the preschoolers was (by necessity) rather primitive. Moreover, only cognitive effects were assessed. Future research needs to identify attitudinal developments regarding the role of television relative to other environmental factors, as well as the age levels when one source takes a dominant position vis a vis other factors. It seems reasonable, however, to posit the cognitive/attitudinal relationship as influenced by television versus peers or parents as one in which television affects political cognitions, while parents' conversations (to one another and directed toward their children) affect political attitudes. Of paramount interest is the overall view of voting and political socialization as it is communicated to their children, and how television's political content mediates or is mediated by parental input. These questions, as well as a host of others, present an impressive agenda for subsequent political socialization research.

TABLE ONE

CHANGE SCORE CORRELATION AND REGRESSION RESULTS*

I. PICTURE IDENTIFICATION FOR:

Carter: Sex (r=.43)

Ford: Sex (r=.45)

Connally: Age (r=.44), Sex (r=.25); $R_{age\&sex}$=.50

II. NAME IDENTIFICATION OF:

Carter: Sex (r=.59), Age (r=.25); $R_{age\&sex}$=.67

Reagan: Age (r=.43)

III. HEARD TALK ABOUT:

Carter: Sex (r=.43), Age (r=.34); $R_{age\&sex}$=.54

Ford: Age (r=.36)

Nixon: Age (r= -.45)

IV. WHAT A PRESIDENT IS: Sex (r=.24), Age (r=.39); $R_{age\&sex}$=.45

V. WHAT AN ELECTION IS: Sex (r=.25), Age (r=.63); $R_{age\&sex}$=.67

VI. WHAT A CAMPAIGN IS: Sex (r=.31)

*All correlations, simple (r) and multiple (R), are statistically significant at the .05 level or less.

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